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CAVALRY RECONNAISSANCE

NUMBER FOUR

OPERATIONS OF
THE 91st CAVALRY RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON,
MECHANIZED, FROM MATEUR TO BIZERTE
(NORTHERN TUNISIA)



FACTUAL NARRATIVE

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THE CAVALRY SCHOOL
ARMY SCHOOL

CAVALRY RECONNAISSANCE

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**Operations of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron,
Mechanized, from Mateur to Bizerte (Northern Tunisia)**

FOREWORD

Reconnaissance is Cavalry's traditional role. Mechanized Cavalry units currently are being trained to do that job for higher commanders.

A Cavalry reconnaissance unit, moving out ahead to obtain information, normally makes the initial contact with the enemy and maintains it. To be of use to higher commanders, the information which the unit sends back must be accurate, complete, and timely.

This pamphlet is Number Four in a series of first-hand accounts of the work Cavalry units have done and are doing on the various battle fronts of World War II. It deals specifically with the operations of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized, during the campaign in Northern Tunisia from 3 May 1943, to 9 May 1943.

Maintaining contact with the enemy in Northern Tunisia over a twenty-three day period during which the unit was subjected constantly to machine gun and artillery fire, personnel of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized, demonstrated the soundness and effectiveness of training which it had undergone. In its swing through Tunisia, the 91st came up against crack German outfits and succeeded in accomplishing its numerous missions. Its performance clearly indicated that training in this country is geared to battle needs.

The preceding publication in this series, Cavalry Reconnaissance Number Three, covered the operations of the subject unit from El Abiod to Mateur.

**Operations of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance
Squadron, Mechanized, from Mateur to Bizerte
(Northern Tunisia)**

On 5 May, the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized, was given the mission of liaison between the ——— Armored Division and the ——— Infantry Division (north), directed to protect the left (north) flank of the former, and ordered to clear from hillmass Djebel Ichkeul¹ what was believed to be a small German detachment. The division artillery needed that high ground immediately. Consequently, the Squadron Commander² lost no time in sending out bantam patrols (one each from Troops B and C) to reconnoiter routes of approach.³ The 91st's CP was at Michaud (see Sketch 1).

1. Viewed from the south, Djebel Ichkeul is a rocky ridge about 1½ miles wide and 5 miles long, consisting of 3 high points, the highest being approximately 500 meters (1,500 feet) above the flat marshy ground at its base. It is bounded on the north side and east end by a salt lake, and on the south side and west end by a marsh in which the depth of the water varies from ankle to waist deep.

2. Lieutenant Colonel Harry W. Candler, Cavalry. Colonel Candler, while a member of Staff and Faculty, The Cavalry School, furnished the information on which this, as well as the preceding narrative (Cavalry Reconnaissance Number Three), is based.

3. FM 100-5, par 216: "Terrain features that afford observation of the hostile dispositions constitute especial objectives of reconnaissance. Active and aggressive action of patrols in seizing such terrain features is indicated."

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As soon as the Sq CO had acquainted the commanders of Troops B and C with the plan for a dismounted attack on Djebel Ichkeul,⁴ commencing the next morning at daylight, he paid Troop A a visit, and then moved on to the platoon in contact with the French to the north of the Sedjenane River.⁵ There he directed that likely crossing sites be reconnoitered against the possibility of the Squadron having to move around the lake to the north. The platoon leader, Lieutenant Wells, already having made a preliminary reconnaissance, stated he believed the river could be forded.

Developments during the day included the arrival of forward elements of the ——— Infantry Division in the morning, movement into the assembly area of the squadron's Troop E (tanks), and receipt of a patrol's report indicating that it had run into machine-gun fire from the French mine on the

FM 100-5, par 219: "When hostile resistance is encountered which cannot be brushed aside or enveloped, a reconnaissance in force constitutes the best means of clearing up an uncertain situation.-----The commander who orders a reconnaissance in force must consider the possibility that his intentions or those of the higher commander may thereby be disclosed. He must also be prepared for the possibility that such reconnaissance may bring on a general engagement."

4. FM 100-5, par 218: "Essential information can frequently be obtained only through attack. Reconnaissance units attack when their mission requires it."

5. FM 100-5, par 221: "Under the protection of the leading elements, the commander usually makes a personal reconnaissance for information of the terrain.-----"

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east slope of Djebel Ichkeul. The report further indicated the apparent impossibility of reaching the ridge with vehicles.

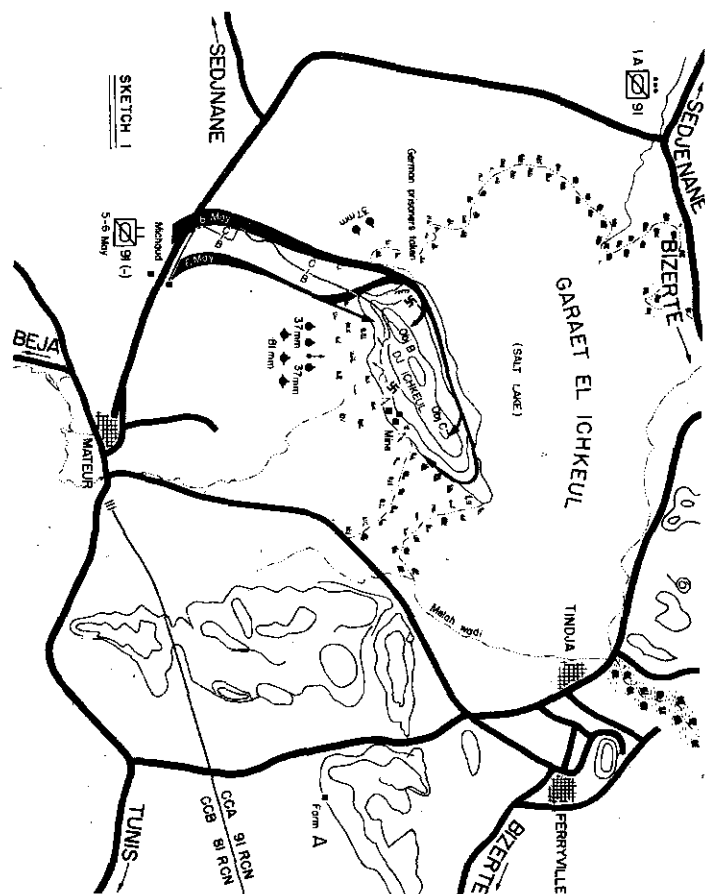
It was planned to attack the high ground from west to east, troops abreast, C on the left, and B on the right, with Captain Douthitt, Troop C Commander, directing the attack. Both troops were to be in readiness positions prior to daylight, 6 May. Vehicles were to remain in the assembly position. The attack was to be supported by fire of the troops' own mortars and the AT platoon (37-mm guns) of Headquarters Troop; a battery of division artillery was to deliver preparatory concentrations.

Troop C, on the left, first to cross the swamp, gained the base of the high ridge and took 30 German prisoners. Troop B, on the right, had almost gained the base of the ridge when it came under intense rifle and machine-gun fire. The Squadron's 37-mm's and mortars, laying on the flashes of German machine guns on the south slope of the hillmass, fired steadily at ranges of 1,800 to 2,000 yards. Troop B sideslipped left and followed the route taken by Troop C" (see Sketch 1).

Meanwhile, guns of the field artillery battery kept pounding away at the mine's stone buildings. The Sq CO ordered Troop A (less 1 platoon) to move

6. TC 107, par 1: "----- They engage in combat only to the extent necessary to accomplish the assigned mission."

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up. The messenger⁷ who carried that order personally evacuated a wounded German officer to Sq CP.

At dusk, leaving 2 messengers at his OP, the Sq CO moved around the west end of the mountain, down the south slope, and passed B Troop's position.⁸ En route he met the party (under the Sergeant Major) which had been sent out by the Sq Ex O to assist in evacuating the wounded.

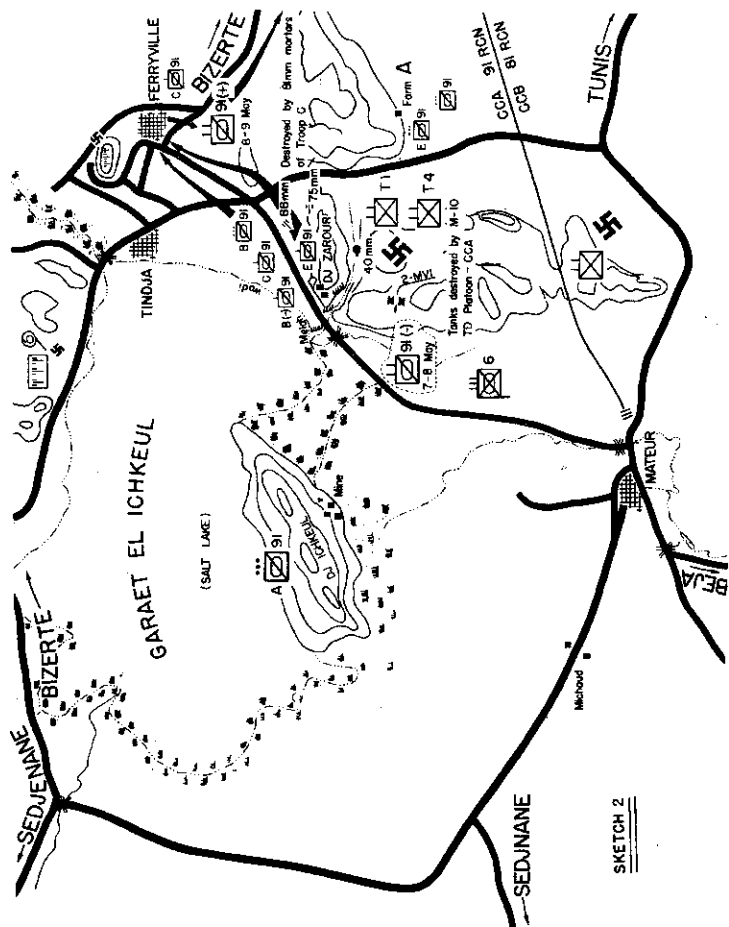
Captain Douthitt, commanding the combined attack, having reconnoitered down the south slope near the French mines, reported that the only remaining resistance was coming from a few scattered snipers. Troop C was ordered back to its vehicles to reorganize, Troop B remaining in position to be relieved later by Troop A.

The following morning, 7 May, the 91st received an order attaching it to Combat Command A and alerting it for an advance on Ferryville. Troop A was to continue its mission of clearing the German snipers off Djebel Ichkeul.

At 1500 word came that the 91st was to be attached to the ——— Armored Infantry Regiment upon arrival at the latter's position about 4½ miles

7. TC 107, par 9b: "----- Radio must be supplemented at times by messengers and visual signals-----."

8. TC 107, par 8c: "Cavalry commanders accompany forward elements to verify and evaluate information promptly. Intimate knowledge of the situation is essential to coordinate the action of subordinate units and to prepare plans for future employment."



SKETCH 2

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to the northeast of Mateur. The Ex O marched the squadron (less Troop A) from Michaud to the designated assembly area (see Sketch 2).

In "last light", 2 German Mark VI tanks rolled over the ridge. Immediately brought under fire by the M10's of the attached tank destroyer platoon, the near tank was hit and set ablaze; the second continued to advance down the draw. The self-propelled M10's stalked their prey and got it after a few registering shots.

At about 2130, the Sq CO received instructions to report for orders to CO,——Armored Infantry.

The mission of the Combat Command was to advance, battalions abreast, on Ferryville, and cut the roads leading into it on the north and the Ferryville—Bizerte road to the east. The 91st was directed to precede the advance, cut the road to the north of Ferryville at the bridge (Oued Tindja), occupy the high ground (NW), and to cut the road at the bridge east of Ferryville.⁹

Opposing German forces were believed to be what remained of the battalions the 91st had faced in the Djebel Tabouna area. The G-2 Summary indicated that the Germans had begun withdrawing to the south on Tunis. During the afternoon, however, Jerry delivered artillery fire across Garaet El

9. TC 107, par 2g: "Reconnaissance units on reconnaissance missions contribute to the security of the main force by reporting the location of enemy forces and by giving timely warning of ground and air attacks. Information and warnings are transmitted directly to units whose security is threatened and to higher headquarters-----."

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Ichkeul from positions to the west of Tindja, and the high ground northwest of Ferryville. The bridge across Wadi Melah had been blown (see Sketch 2).

The high ridge on the 91st's flank (E and N) extended down to the edge of the salt lake Garaet El Ichkeul (see Sketch 2). German Infantry occupied both sides of the lake road.

The plan was for the reconnaissance unit to advance in column of troops on Ferryville. Upon reaching the outskirts of the town, Troop C was to turn to the right on the Ferryville—Bizerte road and block it at the bridge. Troop B, with a platoon of Troop E's light tanks attached, was to advance through Ferryville, cut the bridge over Oued Tindja, and occupy the high ground to the northwest of Ferryville. The Squadron (less detachments) was to follow the route of Troop C.

At dawn, 8 May 1943, Jerry began delivering small-arms fire from the ridge. Rain during the night made it doubtful whether heavy vehicles could lead the advance cross-country. Therefore, a last-minute change of plan called for a reconnaissance team, composed of a platoon of light tanks from Troop E,¹⁰ and a reconnaissance platoon (less heavy vehicles), to precede the Squadron.

The CC A's tank battalions were in dispersed formation on the south slope of the main ridge. The reconnaissance team advanced through this formation to a steep-banked wadi between the ridge and the nose of Djebel Ez Zarour, about 250 yards

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beyond. Here the tanks came under fire of a hostile small-caliber AT gun at the head of the draw (right), but bounded on across the wadi.

Around the nose of Djebel Ez Zarour the 1/4-tons came upon a group of buildings, marked with large red crosses, apparently used by the Germans as a hospital or clearing station. This platoon flushed and captured 30 Germans on the slope of the nearby ridge. From their concealed positions to the west of the road, an equal number emerged with their hands up.

The remainder of the 91st came on through and dispersed.

CC A's 2 tank battalions advanced, one turning to the east around Djebel Ez Zarour, the other to the north of the road, preceded by the M10 platoon.

With German batteries, one on the hill to the northwest of Ferryville, and another to the west of Tindja, going "full blast", the cavalry reconnais-

10. TC 107, par 12c (1) and (2): "The tank company may accompany squadron headquarters initially and may be dispatched later to support reconnaissance troops. The company may be attached as a unit or by platoons to reconnaissance elements when the squadron front is so broad or the terrain so difficult that reserves cannot be moved readily to all parts of the squadron zone. Attachment may be made also when hostile resistance can be foreseen.

"Tanks may be employed on reconnaissance when the volume of enemy fire necessitates greater armor protection for reconnaissance teams and when terrain is too difficult for operation of wheeled vehicles. Light tanks supported by assault guns are effective on reconnaissance in causing the enemy to disclose the location of antitank weapons."

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sance team advanced into a draw beyond the erstwhile hospital. One gun (reported to be an 88-mm) opened up from a cactus patch about 450 yards to the front and succeeded in stopping the tanks moving up on the left flank. To counterbattery the big gun, 3 81-mm mortars were emplaced in the draw just in rear of the tank platoon. The tank platoon leader, from his "hull-down" position, observed the fire and directed the crews by radio. Several "near hits", and one believed to be direct, silenced Jerry.

Over the radio the Combat Commander personally directed the 91st to push forward without delay.

The reconnaissance team's light tanks advanced along the north slope of Djebel Ez Zarour from wadi to wadi, firing at the retreating Germans. The leading platoon of Troop B, followed closely by Troop C, and the remainder of Troop B, covered on the right by the tanks, bounded up the road and into Ferryville. There the Ex O lost no time in sending a platoon from Troop B to the high ground to the northwest of Ferryville,¹¹ Troop C to the east, and dismounting the remainder of the troops to round up the Germans in the town.

One of CC A's battalions by-passed the high ground and turned to the east. Another of its battalions came up along the south slope of Djebel Ez Zarour, crossed the Ferryville—Tunis road, and pur-

11. FM 100-5, par 216: "Terrain features that afford observation of the hostile dispositions constitute especial objectives of reconnaissance. Active and aggressive action of patrols in seizing such terrain features is indicated."

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sued the routed German forces.¹² Both battalions were running low on ammunition and fuel. It appeared that from this point pursuit would have to be by artillery fire.

One cavalry reconnaissance platoon was sent toward the ridge at Farm A with the mission of maintaining contact with the Germans.¹³ The 91st's Support Troop (tanks) was making its way to the north on the Ferryville—Tunis road. One of its platoons was ordered to join the reconnaissance platoon on the ridge (vicinity of Farm A).

12. FM 100-5, par 578: "The pursuit is launched when the enemy is no longer able to maintain his position and endeavors to escape by retreat....."

FM 100-5, par 579: "When a commander recognizes that the enemy is having difficulty in maintaining his position, he utilizes all means to maintain the continuity of the attack and exert a relentless pressure on the defeated enemy."

"Effective pursuit requires leadership and exercise of initiative to the highest degree in all echelons of commandPursuit of a defeated enemy is pushed to the utmost limit of endurance of troops, animals, and vehicles"

FM 100-5, par 580: "The object of the pursuit is the annihilation of the hostile forces.....*Direct pressure* against the retreating forces must be combined with an *enveloping or encircling maneuver* to place troops across the enemy's lines of retreat....."

13. FM 100-5, par 214: ".....contact.....once gained must never be lost....."

FM 100-5, par 222: "Without orders from the higher commander, each unit executes the reconnaissance necessary to its own operations within its own zone of action....."

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Continuing on into Ferryville, the Sq CO reported to the Force Commander that he had seen "thousands of Germans streaming east over the ridges about 5 miles to the east of the town" (see Sketch 2).

Down the ridge and out on the Tindja—Porto Farina road was flowing what appeared to be an "unlimited stream" of German vehicles. Six large German tanks were observed in a draw 1,000 meters to the south. Approximately 1,000 meters further to the south a considerable number of Germans were milling around, apparently reorganizing. Nearby there was a large supply dump. In a draw to the right front was a battery of 6 large-caliber guns draped with camouflage nets. Cattle and sheep were grazing peacefully around the position.¹⁴

At dark, the 91st (less Troop A) was assembled 1½ miles to the southeast of Ferryville. All unit commanders were assembled by the Combat Command for issuance of orders. The 91st, with a platoon, ——— Armored Engineer Battalion, attached, was ordered to precede, commencing at daylight, the movement of the force to the east on the

14. The Sq CO told Ellis (Fifth Army observer) to get the message back to the artillery via one of the tank radios while he took the message back to the Force Commander. Ellis got "in" with the artillery over the tank radio and gave them the targets. An artillery forward observer went with him to the ridge and they brought these very profitable targets under fire during the remaining hours of light.

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Porto Farina road¹⁵ and then to the north (see Sketch 3).

Bn Obj Right (RJ 4½ miles south of El Azib)

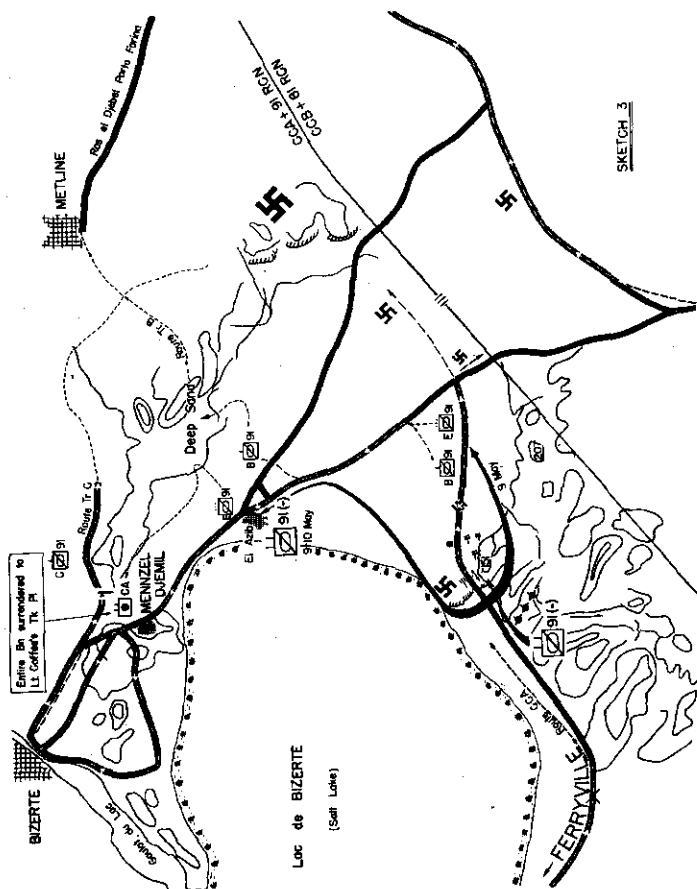
Bn Obj Left (RJ El Azib, about 5 miles south of Bizerte)

Upon return to his CP, the Sq CO issued orally the following order:

Sq to move in dispersed clm of trs; Tr C, followed by Hq and Hq Tr and Tr E (-1 pl), to pass through the defile and turn N across country to Obj L clm; Tr B, with 1 pl, Tr E (tks), attached, to continue on to Obj R clm.

Troop C moved out at daylight. Approximately 7 miles up the road, the unit drew terrific, fortunately inaccurate, artillery and small-arms fire from the ridge to its front. The CO (Capt Sanders) reported: "German Infantry, machine guns, 40-mm and 88-mm guns in position on or just beyond the ridge". Division immediately sent an artillery forward observer up to the high ground on the 91st's right flank to direct artillery fire on the German position.

15. Beyond the bridge across the wadi, the Ferryville—Porto Farina road for about 6 miles is a narrow defile bounded on the north by the Lac de Bizerte and on the south by a series of high ridges and deep wadis perpendicular to the road. Due to the heavy rain the previous day, the ground in the defile could have been plenty slick and muddy. Fortunately, the sun did a swell job of drying the ground by midafternoon.



The CC A tank battalion (with TD platoon attached) came up to the left on the strip between the road and the Lac De Bizerte.

Troop C emplaced its mortars just behind the ridge and the CO sent a platoon dismounted up the steep wadi to find a way around the enemy left (south) flank.¹⁶ Troop B was ordered up on the right of Troop C. The fire fight lasted until about 1530. By that time the vehicles of Troops C, B, and E were right up against the west slope of the ridge (Hill 151), bumper to bumper¹⁷ (see Sketch 3).

The Division Commander came up and inquired: "When are you going to move forward?" The Sq CO explained that the movement was to be made in accordance with the mission and previous order, except that Troop E (light tanks), less 1 platoon, was to lead going north to the Lac, and then along its edge to Bn Obj Left.

The 91st got under way and, as if started by the same button, the tank battalion and the platoon of the 91st's light tanks, the latter led by Lieutenant Dave Termin, began to roll.

The ground for 5 miles to the front was flat, pocked by mud and shell holes, and covered by the fire of German weapons in position on the high ground to the south and east. Two of the tank bat-

16. The platoon returned with the information that it could not get around the hostile flank because of the difficult terrain.

17. German air was inactive at this time. The ridge afforded all vehicles complete defilade.

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talion's mediums were hit. The 91st's Troop E (less 2 platoons, Stowell's and Whitecotton's) and Troop C (all in order) safely crossed the fire-swept plain.

Troop B, preceded by Stowell's light tank platoon, turned to the east towards Bn Obj Right. At the split, Whitecotton's light tank platoon followed right behind Stowell's.

Upon arrival at El Azib, 3½ miles to the south of Menzel-Djemil (12 miles to the south of Bizerte), the Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron immediately posted local security. Lac De Bizerte was on the left (west) flank. To the north a ridge stretches in a half-moon from the edge of the lake to the east of Menzel-Djemil. The country to the south is flat and open but was covered by Troop B with 2 attached light tank platoons. Although late in the day, there still was considerable firing in the rear.

A tank platoon (Lieutenant Coffee's, less 2 tanks) with a reconnaissance platoon (Lieutenant Duntze's) from Troop C, attached, was ordered to reconnoiter to the ridge, and thence along it to Menzel-Djemil.

Meanwhile the Sq CO coordinated with CO of the tank battalion to take over the other half of the high ground to the right.¹⁸ The latter sent one of his tank platoons to the east and south with a mission similar to the one previously given Coffee (see Sketch 3).

18. TC 107, 2 d: "Reconnaissance is slow and less effective at night. Motors are audible for considerable distances, and observation is difficult. Night reconnaissance is limited ordinarily to dismounted patrolling, observation of routes, and the use of listening posts....."

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Quite suddenly the terrific sustained firing on the ridge ceased. Lieutenant Coffee "came in" on the radio with "Have captured what I believe to be an Italian coast artillery battalion, about 700 officers and men." Sq CO requested (via radio) Combat Command Headquarters to send out MP's to handle the prisoners.

In the early darkness, the personnel of the captive Italian coast artillery battalion arrived, led by a ¼-ton and followed by a light tank (Lieutenant Coffee's). Aloof, and marching as a compact little phalanx out ahead of the Italians, were 30 German soldiers. In an improvised enclosure the 91st already had about that many representatives of the "Master Race" who inadvertently had allowed themselves to be captured during the action around El Azib that afternoon. The wounded were loaded into a captured truck and ambulance, the "on foot" contingent herded into a march column, and both headed back towards Ferryville. As before, the ¼-ton led the way with a light tank following in a safety position.

Lieutenant Coffee, upon reporting to his Sq CO, described in detail a large concentration of German soldiers, supplies, and a battery of 6 emplaced coast artillery guns in the vicinity of Menzel-Djemil.¹⁹

19. TC 107, par 7e: "Reconnaissance teams and platoons on reconnaissance report factual information. Reports are relayed to higher headquarters. Any echelon may monitor a radio net of a lower unit to intercept information."

FM 100-5, par 227: "The best information will be of no use if it arrives too late at the headquarters for which it is intended."

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That night the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron received orders to "advance into the peninsula, reconnoiter the 3 roads, and report when same are clear of the enemy."

Troop C, with a platoon of light tanks attached, was ordered to reconnoiter the northern route, a platoon the middle road, and another platoon the southern route. The Squadron (less detachments) was to move by way of the southern route, thence back to the east towards Metline—Porto Farina (see Sketch 3).

Just past Menzel-Djemil, Germans were encountered in a large olive grove. They offered no resistance. One platoon of Troop C stopped to round them up, search them, and start them to the rear under guard. The proceedings had to be stopped, however, since the Squadron didn't have men who could be spared for guards.²⁰

The Sq CO met the remainder of Troop C and its attached platoon at the tip of the peninsula just across from Bizerte. Jerry continued to throw a few rounds of medium caliber HE at the reconnaissance elements, the fire appearing to come from Menzel-Djemil or vicinity now well in the rear.

Troops C and E (less detachments) continued on to the east. Upon arrival at the road junction, report was made by radio to the CC CO that the peninsula now was clear of enemy, but that Germans, moving to the rear, were congesting the roads.

20. After that time, when the Germans came towards the road with their hands up, they were "motioned" on back towards Menzel-Djemil.

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The road referred to runs along the Mediterranean for about 3 miles, then "peters out" as a trail. A report from Troop C stated that deep sand made the trail impassable to any type of vehicle. Therefore, the Sq CO directed Troop C to hold its present position and prevent any further withdrawal of the enemy towards the coast, and Troop B to move on towards Ras El Djebel—Porto Farina.

Troop B found the going in its assigned direction mighty tough due to deep sand. After going as far as possible mounted, the unit dismounted and advanced all the way to the coast²¹ (see Sketch 3).

At about 1100 the Division Commander "came in" on the radio with "Stand by for an important message-----Cease firing. Hold present position until further orders. Germans have surrendered."

The Force Commander issued the order that, although the "cease fire" order had been given, all echelons would enforce by fire the terms of surrender; i.e., all German and Italian soldiers were to cease destruction of arms and equipment and become prisoners of war.

21. TC 107, par 7 b: "Patrols operate across country wherever practicable when enemy forces are believed to be near-----Terrain and the situation may require the use of dismounted patrols-----."

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LESSONS LEARNED

1. Dismounted reconnaissance must precede vehicular movement in rough, difficult terrain.

2. When forward mounted movement is halted by effective artillery or small-arms fire, dismounted patrols must be pushed forward aggressively to locate the enemy main positions.

3. Whenever possible, each unit should hold out a reserve during the day, with a view to having available comparatively fresh personnel for necessary night patrol assignments. Experience has shown that this practice pays off in increased effectiveness of dismounted patrols at night.

4. The enemy frequently increases his activity and rate of fire just prior to his withdrawal. Unless reconnaissance elements hold positions from which his routes of withdrawal can be observed or heard, contact will be lost.

5. Personnel of mechanized cavalry must be able to follow on foot the withdrawing enemy when rugged terrain prevents further vehicular movement. Excellent physical conditioning, well planned and enforced periodic rests, readily available reserve rations, planned dismounted resupply of reserve rations, and the will to "hang on" are the prerequisites for successful combat operation.

6. Unit commanders should visit all of their forward installations *at least once daily*. They should be accompanied by appropriate staff officers. Frequently a unit CO will receive oral intelligence summaries and issue orders or corrective

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instructions on the spot. Upon return to his CP, the commander's attention invariably is distracted before the information he has gained is sent on its way, or any instructions he may have issued are reflected in the journal.

7. In the execution of an offensive mission, particularly one commenced just prior to daylight, stealth and the clever use of covered approaches are as important as supporting or preparatory fire.

8. The operation of a CP is a 24-hour job. A definite schedule of hours should be published daily. Experience has indicated the desirability of 4 shifts. Staff members can perform effectively without rest for such periods. Thereafter, it appears that their efficiency decreases.

9. When contact is probable, a patrol never should by-pass high ground which affords a possible location for an OP. Forward and flank observers are the "eyes" of the platoon or other unit moving up.

10. During exploitation or pursuit operations, reconnaissance radio reports must be quick, constant, by voice, and above all, accurate. Time does not permit CW and cryptography.

11. When exposed vehicular movement is necessary under fire, supporting weapons *must* cover this movement with stationary fire.

12. Officers must realize the extreme importance of maps covering the territory in which they are to operate. They should familiarize themselves thoroughly with the area. They should be able to

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throw the map away. It is downright criminal for any officer to go on a mission without map or actual knowledge of the terrain he is to cover. Non-commissioned officers also must be able to read maps, "pin point" themselves, and report positions by coordinates.

Detailed description of the actions of small units composing the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized, will be the subject of later pamphlets in this series.